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ABSTRACT

This paper describes some aspects of the organization and management of 14 schools that have been participating in the voucher demonstration in Alum Rock, California. The kinds of alternative programs being offered, the allocation of decision-making within the participating schools, and the effects of parent choice are briefly discussed. An example contrasting the intentions of those who designed the demonstration with the actual system as implemented in the third year is used to illustrate one aspect of the process of planned change: appropriate resistance to the proposed reform by those whose legitimate needs have not been adequately considered. (Author/MLF)

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The Organization and Management of Schools Under a System of Parent Choice

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Abstract

This paper describes some aspects of the organization and management of 14 schools which have been participating in the so-called voucher demonstration in Alum Rock, California. The kinds of alternative programs being offered, the allocation of decisionmaking within the participating schools, and the effects of parent choice are briefly discussed. An example contrasting the intentions of those who designed the demonstration with the actual system as implemented in year three is used to illustrate one aspect of the process of planned change: appropriate resistance to the proposed reform by those whose legitimate needs have have not been adequately considered.

The Organization and Management of Schools Under a System of Parent Choice

Those of you who came to hear a presentation on "The Organization and Management of Schools" may be disappointed to learn that I am not going to address any such grandiose topic. What I do intend to discuss is some issues of organization and management in schools which offer parents a choice among alternative educational programs. Specifically, I will be talking about 14 schools which are currently participating in the so-called voucher demonstration in Alum Rock, California. If, after I've said my piece, you feel you've been the victim of false advertising, please talk to the editors of the AERA program who shortened my title.

Rand began studying the voucher demonstration the year it began: 1972. Our report on the first year of the demonstration was published in 1974, and a series of reports analyzing the first four years of the demonstration are to be published in 1977. We have a variety of data on the Alum Rock schools, including an annual survey of teachers in voucher and nonvoucher schools, regular interviews with principals and teacher representatives, direct observation of district activities by our site staff, and detailed data on student enrollments during each year of the demonstration. In the brief time I have to present findings and interpretations today, I won't be able to present all the evidence for our findings, I want you to know that the findings are generally well documented.

The system of parent choice in Alum Rock is far from static. Each year, the rules of the demonstration change. Particularly now, as the district is preparing for the end of federal funding of the demonstration, we may expect to see major changes in the operation of the system. Rather than try to give you an up-to-the-minute description what is going on in Alum Rock, I'd like to present a snapshot of how the demonstration was working at the end of its third year (that is, in the spring of 1975), with particular attention to some of the reasons why it did not work out exactly as its originators had planned it. Wherever the demonstration may go from here, I believe that the first three years are sufficient to illustrate some of the significant organizational issues which are involved in setting up a system of parent choice and alternative educational programs within the public schools.

Many of you are probably familiar with the main features of the voucher demonstration, but let me review briefly how the system was set up during its third year of operation. Alum Rock has 25 elementary and middle schools of which 14 were participating in the demonstration during year three. Each school housed between 2 and 5 distinct educational programs or "mini-schools." These educational programs were developed primarily by teachers at each of the participating schools, with occasional guidance from parents or from the school principal.

Most teachers felt that they had been expected to devise "unique" or innovative educational programs, and most teachers felt that a diversity of educational programs was being offered in year three.

A selection of mini-school titles from year three illustrates the kinds of educational programs which were being offered. Some programs were oriented toward a particular type of subject matter (for example, "Math-Science," "Careers Unlimited," or "World of Fine Arts"). Other mini-schools emphasized a particular approach to learning (for example, "Traditional Plus," "Individualized Learning," or "Learning by Doing"). Several of the programs were advertised as Bilingual/Bicultural or Multicultural."

Most of the elementary school programs were open to children in grades K through 5. Most middle school programs were for grades 6 through 8. There were also variations. Some programs were K-6; some were 1-6; some were kindergarten only. Mini-schools varied in size from 1 classroom to 21 classrooms, with a median size of 6 classrooms. Many of the smaller mini-schools had little choice but to use multi-graded classrooms.

In theory, each mini-school was to operate as an autonomous unit, with its own budget, the freedom to choose its own staff and complete control over its own curriculum. To a certain extent, mini-schools did operate as independent educational units during year three. Most mini-school teachers felt that they had greater influence over curriculum, budget, and staffing decisions than before the demonstration began. Eighty-six percent of the voucher teachers felt they had a lot of influence over curriculum decisions; 57 percent felt they had

a lot of influence over budget decisions; and 51 percent felt they had a lot of influence over new teacher hiring.

However, the degree of influence which teachers had over budget and hiring decisions varied from school to school, depending on the kind of relationship which developed between the building principal and the mini-schools. Some principals let the mini-schools do most or all of their own decisionmaking. Other principals took a much stronger role in decisionmaking, playing down the idea of mini-school autonomy and emphasizing the importance of maintaining a school-wide perspective. These differences are reflected in the finding that, at 5 of the 14 voucher schools, a majority of teachers perceived that the principal's authority had decreased since before the beginning of the demonstration. At the other 9 schools, most teachers felt that the principal's authority had not changed since before the beginning of the demonstration.

What about parent choice? In theory, parents could choose any programs they wished for their children and could transfer their children from one program to another at any time. In practice, parents' rights to choose programs for their children had some limits. In the spring of each year, each mini-school would take applications from parents who wished to enroll their children in that mini-school the following fall. The first parents who applied usually had no difficulty getting their children into whatever mini-school they wished. But after

a certain cutoff date, mini-schools were able to set enrollment ceilings based on the physical capacity of each school building and the numbers of applications already received. Once a mini-school's enrollment ceiling was reached, the mini-school could decline to admit any more students, and the parents would have to settle for a second or third choice program. This did not affect very many students, but it is worth noting because it illustrates a conflict between district's desire to give parents an absolute right of choice and the practical problems of implementing such a system. I will come back to this point later.

What effect did parent choice have on the schools? Let's look first at changes in mini-school enrollments from year to year. There were 22 mini-schools at six voucher schools in year one of the demonstration. Between year one and year two, 10 of the 22 mini-schools experienced an enrollment change of less than 10 percent. Six of the 22 mini-schools lost 10 percent or more of their original student enrollment. One lost 27 percent of its students and another lost 38 percent. Six other mini-schools grew by 10 percent or more, and one entirely new mini-school was formed. Two popular mini-schools experienced enrollment gains of greater than 60 percent between year one and year two.

In year two there were 45 mini-schools at 13 schools. Between year two and year three, 19 of these 45 mini-schools experienced an enrollment change of less than 10 percent. Seventeen of the 45 mini-schools

lost 10 percent or more of their original enrollment. Two of these 17 mini-schools died. Two others lost over half of their enrollment from year two to year three. Nine of the 45 mini-schools grew by 10 percent or more, and 6 new programs were offered beginning in year three. All of these 6 new programs were able to attract enough students to begin classes in the fall of 1974.

If a mini-school lost enrollment, it faced a loss of revenue and the possible loss of some of its staff. However, this prospect was not as serious as it would have been if mini-schools were truly autonomous organizational units. Teacher salaries were fixed by district-wide policy, and a loss in mini-school revenue only meant that teachers teachers would have less discretionary money to spend on materials and supplies, field trips, and so forth. Teachers who were let go from one mini-school due to an enrollment loss were generally taken in by another (growing) mini-school in the same building.

The fact that mini-schools did not face drastic economic consequences if they lost enrollment does not mean that they were indifferent to the prospect of losing students. Forty-nine percent of the voucher teachers said that their mini-school had worried at one time or another about maintaining the desired level of student enrollment. There were several reasons for this. Most teachers liked the mini-schools they were in and would not have wanted to switch to another mini-school. Forty percent reported that there was another mini-school in their building at which they would have difficulty teaching because of differences in educational philosophy.

Also, many teachers identified strongly enough with their mini-schools that they would have experienced a loss of mini-school enrollment as an embarrassment.

The fact that many mini-schools were concerned about maintaining their student enrollments is shown by the incidence of competition among mini-schools. At the end of year three, 32 percent of the voucher teachers reported that there was "a great deal" of competition for students at their school; another 30 percent felt there was "a moderate amount" of competition for students; 23 percent perceived "a small amount" of competition for students; and only 15 percent of the voucher teachers felt there was no competition for students at their school. Most of the teachers who felt there was a small or moderate amount of competition for students seemed to find such competition acceptable. Most of the teachers who felt there was a great deal of competition felt that this competition was "harmful." These teachers often tried to exert pressure on their colleagues to reduce the degree of competition among mini-schools. There is some evidence that the degree of competition among mini-schools has declined as the demonstration has progressed.

So far I have focused on the desire of mini-schools not to lose students. This does not mean, however, that mini-schools were necessarily eager to expand their enrollments. If a parent demand for a particular mini-school increased, that mini-school was expected to take on new teachers and accommodate the increased demand. This was a district policy designed to maximize parents' rights to choose the programs they wanted for their children. Many teachers did not appreciate this policy,

because they liked working in small to medium-sized mini-schools and did not necessarily want the hassle of adding a new staff member whenever parent demand happened to fluctuate upward. In other words, mini-schools usually had incentives to maintain their enrollments but not to expand them. This created an ironic situation in which a mini-school's optimum strategy would be to build a reputation with parents wh[illegible] was good but not too good.

There are many other facts I could share with you about how the system of parent choice in Alum Rock has affected the schools there, but at this time I would like to focus on the matter of discrepancies between the way the system was working in year three and the way the original designers of the system envisioned that it would work. In part, these discrepancies may be explained by the political power of established interest groups which did not want their positions undermined by the demonstration. Certainly the teachers did not intend for the demonstration to go so far as to threaten their conditions of employment with the district. The principals as a group naturally had an interest in maintaining or restoring the school as the primary locus of decisionmaking. And so forth.

On the other hand, discrepancies between theory and practice are sometimes simply due to unrealistic ideals on the part of the reformers. In the case of Alum Rock, I will argue that the designers of the system took a good idea too far when they worked out the rules for parent choice and the system of mini-school accountability.

The original idea of educational vouchers began, of course, as an idea for increasing the accountability of the public schools. Milton

Friedman (1962) argued that the process of political action was too "cumbrous" a mechanism for making the schools accountable to parents (p. 91). Christopher Jencks' (1970) case for competition and choice makes the same basic point: "the political mechanisms which supposedly make public schools accountable to their clients work clumsily and ineffectively" (p. 1; emphasis added). These voucher proponents argued that enabling parents to choose among competing educational providers would make the schools more directly accountable to parents and insure that the schools would be more responsive to what parents wanted for their children.

The designers of the Alum Rock voucher proposal took the accountability challenge very seriously. In fact, they tried to design a system which would make the schools "instantly" accountable to parents. Their ideal was that a parent should be able to change his child from one program to another at any time, that a program should be required to admit immediately any student who applied, and that a program's revenues should immediately be adjusted to reflect the program's current enrollment of students.

This idealized system of "instant" accountability, if it had been implemented, would have gone far beyond what private schools now offer to parents who can afford them. Most private schools admit students only at selected times of the year and require that applications for admission be submitted well in advance of the date on which students are to begin classes. Most private schools have an enrollment limit beyond which they will not admit additional applicants. Many have waiting lists. At most private schools, a parent who withdraws his

child at an arbitrary time will not receive a refund on the tuition which was paid in advance.

The fact is that all organizations seek to establish some kind of a buffer or smoothing device between their technological core and the vagaries of the environment, as James Thompson so ably explained in his book, Organizations in Action (1967). Different organizations do this in different ways. Some try to even out variations in demand by manipulating their inventories. Some seek long-term contracts with their customers so they will be able to predict future business more accurately. Most organizations try to build financial reserves to tide them over slack periods. All of these practices serve to reduce the vulnerability of organizations to short-term changes in their environments. In other words, organizations seek to reduce their day-to-day "accountability" to the environment. These efforts to reduce day-to-day accountability to the environment are not simply perverse attempts to avoid accountability altogether. Rather, they reflect the rational intent of organizations to operate efficiently and to be able to respond to changing environmental conditions in an orderly way.

Teachers in Alum Rock resisted the district's requirement to admit new students whenever they applied primarily because it interfered with the orderly planning and execution of their educational programs. I agree with the teachers. I believe that the reformers in Alum Rock got carried away with their objectives of greater parent choice and accountability and took these ideas to a point where they were no longer workable. The rights of parents to choose among educational programs have to be balanced against the legitimate needs of educators to plan and

carry out their programs with a reasonable degree of certainty about their enrollments and resources from day to day. I would argue that this includes the right to set maximum enrollments for educational programs, even if this does prevent some parents from enrolling their children in the programs of their first choice.

The point I would like to make, however, is not limited to this specific issue. I suspect that what happened in Alum Rock is not atypical of the reform process generally. It seems to me that idealism and a bit of overzealousness on the part of those who plan reform is not at all uncommon, and that resistance to the ideas of reformers is often based on legitimate factors which the reformers did not give sufficient weight in drawing up their proposals for change. The fact that innovations are usually modified during the implementation process does not necessarily mean that we should despair of changing the system. Rather, when our plans go wrong we should take a hard look at our ideals and ask whether they have led us to play down the importance of legitimate opposing factors in making our plans for change.

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